On comparing ancient chinese and greek ethics: The tertium comparationis as tool of analysis and evaluation

Weber, Ralph

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110310115-005

Ralph Weber (Basel)

On Comparing Ancient Chinese and Greek Ethics: The *tertium comparationis* as Tool of Analysis and Evaluation

Everything is comparable with everything else in one respect or another. Incomparability, strictly speaking, is a misnomer, for any such claim of incomparability cannot but must rest on a prior comparison of what is then considered to be incomparable (except perhaps if the incomparability is merely definitional, i.e. without descriptive value, such as God being posited as beyond comparison, cf. Isaiah 40:25). Perhaps incomparability is to be understood rather in terms of some specific respect to which only the claim is thought to apply. The proverbial apples and oranges are both generically fruit, grow on trees and are edible, but they are also, say, smaller in size than non-embryonic elephants are. In all these respects, what we have is straightforward comparability. Still, they might be claimed to be incomparable, for instance, in respect of their metaphysical essences, i.e. of appleness and orangeness, since in that sense, an apple is something essentially different from an orange. To be essentially different, however, does not mean to be incomparable. For any such claim of incomparability *qua* essential difference is at the same time limited by the fact that, without the assertion of at least one commonality, such difference could not possibly be claimed. That commonality lies, trivially, in the capacity for both *relata* to be related to the feature for which incomparability is asserted. That apples and oranges have metaphysical essences, or may be related to talk of metaphysical essences, is of course a claim itself, but more importantly it is a claim of commonality, even if each such an essence is otherwise thought to be unique to the point of escaping all assertions of common respects. To be unique means to be different in all possible respects. In other words, if there putatively is no commonality and only differences, then these differences are still differences with regard to something, and that something is an asserted commonality at the very least in terms of implying a common relatability to the regard in which one or the other difference is claimed. Hence, when comparing, there is necessarily an assertion of commonality.

The catch-phrase comparing apples and oranges is of course not only all too often appealed to in such contexts, it is probably also being misused. For the sense of incomparability that it seeks to express is tied to a use of the term "comparable" that emphasizes the commonality of two *comparata* so greatly as to consider them to be "more or less the same", to be "substitutable" – or, inverse-

ly, with regard to the proverb's apples and oranges "not" to be the "same", "not" to be "substitutable". If a football player is fouled, seriously hurt and needs to be substituted (and no change of tactic seems desirable), the coach then might want to think of a "comparable" player sitting on the bench. If the fouled and hurt soccer player in question happens to be Lionel Messi, the "incomparable" Lionel Messi, no substitute on the bench might possibly be considered a substitute. "Comparable" and "incomparable" in these senses are mostly either about commonality only or the complete absence thereof. They come close to be synonyms of "substitutable" and "not substitutable". When the coach is looking for a comparable player on the bench, no judgement is passed on the overall comparability of these players in terms of commonalities and differences (or similarities and dissimilarities), i.e. no answer to the question whether or not they can be compared. In fact, it is the asserted lack of much commonality and the abundance of difference, hence the fact that Messi is "comparable" with other players in a second sense of the term that makes him "incomparable" in the first sense. Messi is "comparable" and "incomparable".

The distinction between these two senses of "comparable" is fundamental to the topic of this chapter, because comparisons of ancient China and Greece usually mean to appeal to the second sense, to the question of comparability in terms of commonalities and differences, where incomparability simply is not an option. If in the context of such a study the comparer comes to state that ancient China and Greece are "comparable", he or she would be stating the obvious, but the statement would usually not mean to say that they are as such "more or less the same" or "substitutable". That would be a rather boring and probably a superficial statement. However, it is of the utmost importance to understand that any comparison between ancient China and Greece partially but necessarily builds on a series of commonalities; and with regard to these asserted commonalities only, ancient China and Greece are really being claimed to be mutually "substitutable". So if we compare ancient China and ancient Greece for their "ethics", we minimally must claim that both *comparata* are relatable to some same concept of "ethics". That aspect of ancient Chinese ethics is of necessity substitutable with the corresponding aspect of ancient Greek ethics, because it is the same aspect. The technical term for this common aspect of two (or more) *comparata* is *tertium comparationis:* the third of comparison.[1]

1 Although the subject matter expressed by the *tertium comparationis* is dealt with, for example, in the context of metaphors in Plato (*Laches* 192a–b), Aristotle (*Topics* 140a8–13; *Poetics* 1457b; *Rhetoric* 1406b), Cicero (*De Oratore*, III, XXXIX, 157), and Quintillian (*Institutio Oratoria*, VIII, VI, 8), the expression itself is attested only as late as in the Baroque period. The *Enzy-*

In this chapter, I introduce the *tertium comparationis* alongside a set of related distinctions as a tool of analysis helping us to understand better the presuppositions and claims of any given comparison. I also ask whether and to what extent this set of distinctions can serve us as an evaluative tool which helps us to distinguish between successful and failed comparison. Throughout, my focus is on comparisons of ancient Chinese and Greek philosophy, in general, and of ethics, in particular. Fairly recently this field of studies (the present volume features some of the main proponents) has acquired the label "Sino-Hellenic studies". This term is found in Steven Shankman and Stephen W. Durrant's introduction to their edited collection of essays entitled *Early China/Ancient Greece: Thinking through Comparisons* (2002: p. 1). The label has lately been brought to prominence by Jeremy Tanner's highly instructive review article on Sino-Hellenic studies (2009: p. 105), which, he makes clear, are not in any way exclusively devoted to philosophy, but also to medicine, mathematics or literature (that broader and cross-fertilizing perspective being its purported strength and originality). In his review, Tanner approaches Sino-Hellenic studies from the viewpoint of a classicist. I have myself recently tried to discuss Tanner's contribution and Sino-Hellenic studies in general from the viewpoint of comparative philosophy, arguing that not every text in comparative philosophy that somehow draws on ancient China and ancient Greece should automatically be understood to be about "Sino-Hellenic comparative philosophy" (Weber, 2013a). In the present chapter, I intend to follow up questions that have not been addressed satisfactorily in my previous writing on the topic, particularly the relationship of what I call the pre-comparative *tertium* and what is conventionally called the *tertium comparationis* in terms of the use this distinction might have for analytic and evaluative purposes (Weber, 2013b; 2014a). This requires understanding comparison as a process.

I Introducing the Tool of Analysis

Analytically, four aspects of comparison are readily distinguished: 1. A comparison is always made by someone; 2. At least two *relata* (*comparata*) are compared; 3. The *comparata* are compared in some respect (*tertium comparationis*); and 4. The result of a comparison is a relation between the *comparata* in view of the respect chosen. Obviously, much hinges on there being a comparer who for

klopädie Philosophie und Wissenschaftstheorie mentions Erhard Weigel and his 1693 book *Philosophia Mathematica*, see: Thiel (2004: pp. 239 – 240).

some reason or another has come to believe that, although everything is somehow comparable with everything else, the chosen *comparata* are particularly worthy of being thrown together side by side (παραβάλλειν), i.e, that they should be compared. It is therefore, I submit, helpful to distinguish a fifth aspect that is to be located in the above, roughly chronological characterisation of comparison between the first and second aspects: 5. The two (or more) *comparata* share a pre-comparative *tertium*, constituted by at least one commonality (i. e. being chosen for comparison by the comparer) and probably by many more commonalities (*tertia*). Crucially, most of these commonalities are already well established (even if only vaguely, implicitly or unaware by the comparer) before the comparer sets out to compare them.

To give a simple example: If I seek to compare "the ancient religious texts of China and Greece for their conception of the good life", then there is a series of comparative claims that I posit simply by describing my undertaking in these and not other terms. For instance, I presuppose that talk of "ancient", of "religious", and of "texts" both in China and in Greece is apposite, that these are useful categorizations, descriptions or qualifications. I also posit that China and Greece represent a meaningful or even a particularly meaningful division with regard to ancient religious texts and conceptions of the good life, although what I understand by China and Greece is open for further investigation. It might be a host of things: two geographical realms, two cultural spheres, two civilizations, two contemporary economic players, the two most important, or two out of a few or of many, and so forth. There might be further and less obvious comparative claims that I am making. For instance, it seems that I would also be making a claim about the particular usefulness or adequacy of contemporaneous comparison. Or why else would I turn to "ancient" texts in both cases? All of these aspects represent presupposed commonalities of the *comparata* – China and Greece – that are firmly established before I set out to undertake the comparison. It is these commonalities that my notion of the pre-comparative *tertium* refers to.

At this juncture, a second, related distinction must be introduced. In earlier writing and up to this point in this chapter, I have indiscriminately referred to *comparata*, but I now wish to refer to that which the comparer sets out to compare, that which is *to be* compared, as *comparanda* and to refer to that which *is* and comes to *have been* compared in the course of the comparison as *comparata* (cf. also Weber, 2014b). In light of this distinction, the pre-comparative *tertium* emerges as a privileged vantage point for analysis of comparisons. With regard to the comparer, it may give us an opportunity, inasmuch as there is any such opportunity, to uncover the reasons and purposes attached to the comparison and to reconstruct some of the presuppositions guiding the comparer's under-

standing of the *comparanda* on the mere basis of the given text comprising the comparison. For it may be a rare case, if it exists at all, that a comparer compares two (or more) *comparata* without having any presupposition whatsoever that has led him or her to choose these *comparanda* and not others. In academic comparison, where the universe of cases is always in one or another way predefined, such a case can safely be ruled out. To the extent that the choice of *comparanda* is not random, but (also) motivated by asserted commonalities (beyond the one commonality of each being a *comparandum*), knowledge of these commonalities is itself the result of prior comparison. For how else can you come to hold that two objects (or events, or whatever) share a commonality, if you have not put them next to one another and compared them with the result of finding a relation of commonality between them?

From a broader perspective, the pre-comparative *tertia* of a given comparison are often drawn from earlier comparisons (they are in this sense post-comparative), while the given comparison will necessarily produce new post-comparative *tertia* (perhaps in turn used in later comparisons as pre-comparative *tertia*). Thus emerges the dynamic picture of a great chain of comparisons. As important as it would be to understand this inevitable broader context *vis-à-vis* a given case of comparison, it is also pertinent to understand as much as possible the exact workings of the case in hand. The distinctions between *comparanda* and *comparata* as well as of the pre-comparative *tertium*, the *tertium comparationis* and the post-comparative *tertium* offer an analytically refined take on the artificially isolated given case of a single comparison – which looked at more closely, however, turns out to contain just another chain and complex structure of comparisons informing the resulting relation of the overall comparison. What my proposed vocabulary hence helps to highlight (and to analyse) is the inner dynamic of a given case of comparison, as it is for instance advanced in the many scholarly articles or research projects announcing a comparative study in their title.

The inner dynamic of a given case of comparison marks an important gap that any comparative inquiry produces. When choosing to compare two *comparanda*, the comparer has some presupposition or presumed knowledge of what these *comparanda* are. When then comparing them, each in the light of the other, the comparer it seems of necessity acquires new knowledge about the *comparanda*, i.e. knowledge that he or she could not possibly have possessed before the comparison: hence the gap between what the *comparanda* are and what the *comparata* are in the understanding or knowledge of the comparer. Distinguishing carefully between the *comparanda* and the *comparata* helps prevent us fall into a kind of Meno's paradox of inquiry, for the knowledge that the comparer ends up with is clearly different from the knowledge he or she began with,

due to the effort of further inquiry.[2] The paradox presupposes that any inquiry is such that what one starts off with inquiring is the same that what one ends up with. It is perhaps intuitively most persuasive regarding questions of the Socratic type, such as "what is virtue?", "what is truth?" etc. Regarding comparative inquiry, the paradox in the last instance fails to be persuasive, and drawing the distinction between *comparanda* and *comparata* (if that is a meaningful distinction), I believe, dissolves the paradox.

Distinguishing between *comparanda* and *comparata*, however, should not mislead us into thinking that the two are in any way neatly distinct. In the process of comparison, *comparanda* are being transformed into *comparata*. The two terms demarcate an analytic distinction for what are two different stages in that transformation. But very obviously, and without going into the intricate metaphysical problems of the nature of change, alteration and transformation, the claim must be that the resulting *comparata* are still in some important sense the same as the initial *comparanda*. In one sense, but not in another; for they are the same *and* they are different. Were they not the same in any sense, merely different, then the comparison would not have been about what it was supposed (and perhaps announced) to be about. Would they be just the same and no different, then no inquiry and no comparison would have taken place.[3]

So one way of investigating the inner dynamics of a given comparison is to ask a set of questions, first and foremost those corresponding to the distinguished five aspects of comparison:

1. Who is performing the comparison?
2. What commonality supports the choice of what is to be compared?
3. What is being compared with what?
4. In what respect(s) does the comparer compare that which he or she compares?
5. What relation results from comparing what the comparer compares in that respect?

2 In Plato's dialogue *Meno*, Socrates rephrases a paradox with which Meno seeks to challenge him: "Do you realize what a debater's argument you are bringing up, that a man cannot search either for what he knows – since he knows it, there is no need to search – nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for." (*Meno*, 80e, trans. G.M.A. Grube).

3 This may seem overstated. Perhaps I should say, no "productive" comparison has taken place. Any new respect in which two *comparanda* are compared adds a feature to those *comparanda* that transforms them in the eyes of the comparer who has hitherto not looked at them from that respect. A person who uses only respects that he or she has used before in exactly the same manner does not compare with an interest of finding something new, but rather confirms what he or she had compared earlier.

And in the light of the above set of distinctions:

6. How does the choice of the pre-comparative *tertium* restrict the realm of possible *tertia comparationis?*
7. How does a chosen *tertium comparationis* qualify the *comparanda?*
8. What role do the *comparanda* play in the result of the comparison?
9. ...

These and further questions may be raised in view of any scholarly comparison. Obviously, the questions are not easily answered. On the basis of the text comprising the comparison only, a pre-comparative *tertium* and a *tertium comparationis* may be identified relatively easily. In each case, the analyst simply notes the explicit assertions of commonality. Each such assertion amounts to a claim of commonality that might or might not be persuasive, and hence might be subject to criticism or to demands for further clarification, substantiation, and so forth.

The analysis of a text comprising a comparison will bring out claims of commonality at the levels of what the *comparanda* are thought to be (pre-comparative *tertium*), against which common regards they may be further compared (*tertium comparationis*), and of what characterizes the nature of the *comparata* that emerge from the comparison (post-comparative *tertium*). The status accorded to the chosen *tertia comparationis* plays a crucial role in the transformation of the *comparanda* into *comparata*. Each respect in which the two *comparanda* are compared may but perhaps need not qualify the nature of the *comparanda*, depending on whether one thinks of the respect as expressing an ontological or merely a heuristic relation to the *comparanda* and whether one buys into that distinction of ontological vs. heuristic. Such an analysis of *tertia* that are explicitly asserted in a text is finite, to be sure, but a large part of the text may turn out to be relevant. If we compare ancient China and ancient Greece for their ethics, any qualification of any of these terms matters as a qualification of the pre- or post-comparative *tertia*. In this way, a huge map of claims emerges. To what extent such an analysis will prove useful, is itself questionable, but it should be clear enough that the main comparative claims of a text should be susceptible to this kind of scrutiny.[4]

4 For an analysis along these lines, see: Weber (2013c).

II Exemplary Analyses

Before offering exemplary analyses of two texts that in my view comprise highly sophisticated comparisons, some important tensions present from the outset of my analysis of these comparisons should be noted. One of the many contexts of these texts is constituted by the disciplinary and other labels to which the texts are related. The two texts are, for instance, related by me to the label indicated in my title, "ancient Greek and Chinese ethics", but often they are simultaneously related to a label in their more immediate context of presentation. The text by Jean-Paul Reding that I want to analyse, "Greek and Chinese Categories" (2004), is one essay of many by him collected in a volume with the label "early Greek and Chinese rational thinking" in its title. Whereas my title announces my text to be about "ethics", Reding's text is by himself somehow related to "rational thinking", and it is obvious that by including Reding's text in my analysis, I somehow (in what might appear to stretch the matter quite a bit) relate his text to "ethics". Whereas I refer to "ancient", he refers to "early", which might be an insignificant variation, but it might also be expressive of some significant difference in terms of the invoked temporality. Again, by including Reding's text in my analysis, I somehow turn his "early" into my "ancient". It should be clear that these are merely the more obvious examples, but that some such similar process of appropriation also occurs with the terms "Greek and Chinese" in spite of their deceptive co-presence in all labels. Similarly with my second example, a text by Andrew Plaks (2002) published in the already mentioned collection of essays with the label "early China/ancient Greece" in its title: here some significance is clearly attributed to the variation of "early" and "ancient" (although the introduction gives no clue as to what significance the variation is meant to carry, using all possible combinations with the exception of "ancient China/early Greece", which leaves some room for speculation). Plaks's title refers to "Aristotle's *Ethics* and the *Zhongyong*", which highlights two texts, one of which seems, at first glance at least, rather straightforwardly to relate to my title and its mention of "ethics". The two texts are related to Greek and Chinese, respectively, although it is unknown whether, say, it is being claimed that Aristotle's *Ethics* represents all of "Greek ethics" or just a part of it. The *Zhongyong* of course could also be related to "ethics", it could fill in the part for "Chinese ethics"; it could, however, also simply be used in a contrastive comparison and not be about ethics at all.[5]

5 Given that Reding's essay appears in a collection of essays by Reding himself, whereas Plaks's

Each of these labels posits a series of claims of commonality and difference, or of similarity and dissimilarity, and the mentioned tensions of the several labels arise due to differences in such claims. Take, for example, the title of my paper. Whoever sets out to *compare* "ancient Chinese and Greek ethics" and explicitly conceptualizes the subject-matter to be compared in these terms thereby shows commitment to a series of claims, including the claim that there is some benefit in comparing it using these and not other terms. Clearly, there is a claim about the meaningfulness of using the word "ethics" here and there, as well as the word "ancient". In some sense, both *comparanda* must be related to each of these words in the same manner, which is not to say that there is exactly the same, full-blown ethics or antiquity in both cases (which would make it pointless to compare in that respect). One would perhaps (but not necessarily) draw on a different series of claims if the title were rephrased as comparing "Chinese *lunlixue* and Greek ethics" or "Chinese *daode* and Greek *ethika*", making use of Chinese terms for which "ethics" has come to serve as a translation.

Obviously, an important claim of difference is introduced by the terms "Greek" and "Chinese", which must somehow relate to "ethics" and "ancient", but which probably are also informed by a series of background assumptions that are not spelt out in the title, but often are explicit in the text itself. It is thus that "Greek" and "Chinese" may somehow refer to philosophies, cultures, mentalities, ways of life, civilizations, languages, textual corpora, or the birthplace of modern Europe and China, or – viewed from another angle – "Greek" may stand for a large number of *poleis*, for Athens only, for Athens at a certain period in time, or for Aristotle, and so forth, as "Chinese" may be a stand-in for pre-Qin Warring States China, for the state of Lu, for Mengzi, etc. Yet, as should be clear by now, any claim of difference includes a claim of commonality, albeit perhaps each at a different level, that is expressed as the answer to the question: "in what respect are they different?" Hence, if "Greek" and "Chinese" are meant to articulate a difference based on the background assumption of referring, say, to two "different" cultures, then the comparer at the same time posits a claim of commonality, i.e. of the common applicability of the term "culture".

It is these claims, certainly those explicitly articulated, but also to some extent those only implicitly introduced, that a focus on *tertia comparationis* and pre-comparative *tertia* may help bring into the open. It is from this perspective, then, that I wish to speak of a "tool of analysis" and test its effectiveness when applied to comparative texts.

---

essay appears in a collection edited by a third party, we might be looking for more coherence between the essay title and the collection in Reding's case.

Analysis of "Greek and Chinese Categories"

Reding's essay on "Greek and Chinese Categories" is not a straightforward comparison of Greek and Chinese categories, since much of it is devoted to the question of whether in ancient Chinese texts there is something like a list of categories that could serve as the second *comparandum* in a comparison with Greek categories. In brief, Reding in turn offers three distinct answers to this question:

(1) It is wrong to presume the necessary existence of Chinese categories (Benveniste, Granet) or construct a list of Chinese categories (Graham) as relative to the Chinese language.

(2) Our evidence tells us that Chinese philosophy did not have a list of categories.

(3) A list of Chinese categories can be reconstructed based on a close examination of the problems that Chinese texts and Aristotle's list of categories were similarly conceived of as answering to (Reding).

Having thus established Chinese categories, Reding then sets out to compare them to the Greek categories. Given this setting, we learn a lot about Reding's intentions behind his comparison (rejecting two mistaken views and putting forth his own view) and would of course learn even more were we to undertake a fuller analysis and also consider his other chapters and particularly his introduction. But for the purposes of this chapter, I will simply focus on this one text and especially on Reding's comparison between Greek and Chinese categories.

The question of what is compared with what in Reding's essay has an easy answer, namely Greek and Chinese categories, as well as a more complex answer if we take into account the pre-comparative *tertia* informing the choice of *comparanda* in view of the involved words, i.e. "Greek", "Chinese" and "categories". At the level of pre-comparative *tertia*, it is obvious from the very beginning of the text that Reding by "Greek categories" means "Aristotle's categories", although it becomes later a matter of concern to what extent "category" here is a translational term for *katêgoria* only, semantically showing more overlap with the English "predication" or "predicate" (pp. 84–85), which of course is already reflected in the traditional Latin title *Predicamenta*. Reding also speaks of "Aristotle's categories" in the context of "the Greek theory of categories developed by Aristotle and variously used also by other Greek philosophers, such as Plato, for example…" (p. 83). This claim of a "Greek theory of categories" may be read as one answer to the tension in Reding's essay between the title's talk of "Greek categories" and the essay's almost exclusive focus on "Aristotle's categories". Another answer would relate the words "Greek" and "Chinese" in the title not to some

Greece and China, but to the Greek and Chinese language and to the (in Reding's view mistaken) view that categories are relative to language. In Reding's text, it is also made abundantly clear that the "and" in "Chinese and Greek categories" is not implying an exclusivity in the sense of "if a category is not Chinese then it must be Greek" and vice versa. Reding begins his text with Benveniste's suggestion of an "African Aristotle" and Kagame's *La philosophie bantu-rwandaise de l'être* and also offers a short discussion of "Indian categories", which he pursues no further due to his admitted "ignorance of Indian philosophy", but also and more importantly due to the fact that "Sanskrit is, like Greek, an Indo-European language" (p. 67) and they are therefore not "wholly independent of each other" (p. 68). It is thus that "Chinese categories" in Reding's reasoning emerge as the ideal case for testing the view that categories are relative to language. There is therefore an explicit reason given for the choice of the second *comparandum*.

Reding's comparison at the end of his essay, however, is not simply juxtaposing Aristotle's list of categories (or Aristotle's or the Greek theory of categories) with some Chinese list of categories (or some Chinese theory of categories). Rather, not unlike Collingwood's emphasis on reading all statements as answers to questions (1944: pp. 24–33; 1998: p. 23), he is seeking to "go back to the question, to the philosophical problem, to which Aristotle's table of categories has been the answer" (p. 84) or, using a slightly different formulation, to "go back to the intention or to the motives that lay behind Aristotle's theory of the categories" (p. 68). Looking at Aristotle's earliest available lists of categories, those in the *Topics* and the *Categories*, Reding reconstructs the "function of the doctrine of categories" (p. 86) as related to problems raised by "irregular" and "regular predication" in the context of the "search for definitions" (p. 85): "a definition must… bring together terms belonging to one and the same logical type" (p. 86). Since such "logical types" or "categories" are easily confused in Greek, there is a "necessity to draw a list of categories and to provide criteria independent of language to identify them" (p. 87). "Real homonymy" is a phenomenon causing such confusing, as Reding illustrates by "different categorical meanings of 'good'" – thus introducing Aristotle's notion of "focal meaning" (p. 86). It is then with this "question in mind" that Reding turns to "classical Chinese philosophy" to "see if any of the ancient Chinese philosophers did ask the same questions as Aristotle, and if so, what these answers were and what role, if any, linguistic considerations had played in giving these answers" (p. 68). The "same questions", Reding claims, were asked by the Later Mohists. Their "dialectic *bian*" aimed at establishing "the correct description and definition of basic

terms, chiefly of those belonging to the domain of ethics" (p. 87).[6] And like Aristotle the Later Mohists experience a "conflict between logical and linguistic structures" (p. 89), although that happens to much a lesser extent. As Reding illustrates, it happens when they, too, are faced with the problem of homonymy. The more complex answer to the question of what is being compared with what in Reding's text can now be stated explicitly: on the one hand, the Greek categories, as they are established in Aristotle's early writings of the *Topics* and *Categories*; on the other hand, Chinese categories, as they can be found in the Later Mohists' texts, both understood as answers to the problem of finding criteria for solving conflicts between logical and linguistic structures arising from attempts at definitions, which is therefore the fundamental pre-comparative *tertium*.

There are, of course, other pre-comparative *tertia*; most prominently among them is the assertion that both Aristotle and the Later Mohists are to be understood as being engaged in "philosophy". Throughout the text, Reding leaves no doubt that what is juxtaposed is "philosophers" here and there grappling with "philosophical" problems. Due to the fact that Reding nowhere sets out to compare "Greek and Chinese categories" in view of each being the products of "philosophy", there is no doubt that in his comparison "philosophy" functions not as a *tertium comparationis*, but rather as a pre-comparative *tertium*. That it is the context of philosophy within which both *comparanda* are to be situated is presumed from the outset and never comes to be questioned. At the level of the *tertia comparationis*, there are several explicit respects along which Reding compares both *comparanda*, e. g. the kind of text (lecture notes vs. "the result and the final product of several generations of thinkers", p. 89), the mention of difficulties encountered in finding the answer to the problem (recorded in detail by Aristotle vs. a seeming mention of the result in the Mohist case), the way of dealing with the problem of homonymy, the use of examples or the facility "in recognizing categorical distinctions" (pp. 90 – 91).

The result of the comparison is stated after Reding quotes from the Later Mohists the famous statement on incomparability in terms of the measure between the length (*chang*) of a night and a piece of wood or the value (*gui*) of aristocratic rank, one's own parents, right conduct and a price (B 6), and deserves to be quoted in full:

> Theorem B 6 thus shows that categorical distinctions are not unknown in ancient China. There too, these distinctions came to light as a result of a strong preoccupation with definition. The most important result for our inquiry is that when the Later Mohists draw dis-

6 Here then it becomes evident that it might not all be that much of a stretch to relate Reding's text to a discussion about "ethics".

> tinctions, these appear to coincide exactly with categorical distinctions also made by Aristotle. Moreover, the tie that holds together the four senses of *gui*, 'dear', can be equated with the Aristotelian 'focal meaning'. (p. 89)

The last sentence of the quote suggests that the Later Mohists like Aristotle would also have drawn a distinction between chance and real homonymy and also have explained the latter as the result of a convergence of the other terms (senses of *gui*) towards one "focal meaning", which in the case of "good" Reding identifies as "good as an *ousia* 'essence' = God" whereas he abstains from identifying one of the meanings in the case of *gui*, there instead referring to "the tie that holds together the four senses".

Analysis of "Means and Means: A Comparative Reading of Aristotle's Ethics and the Zhongyong"

Plaks's essay (2002) is a seemingly straightforward comparative inquiry and is clearly structured in four parts: "Preliminary Remarks", "The Mean in Ancient Greece", "The Mean in Chinese Thought", and "Concluding Remarks". It does not take much to see that the subtitles apparently suggest a set of *comparanda* different from the one mentioned in the title. But, perhaps, the subtitles are merely meant to indicate that Plaks's "comparative reading" includes a contextualization of both texts in terms of "ancient Greece" and "Chinese thought" respectively. The wonderful (homonymic?) title of "means and means" immediately raises the question whether and in what sense "means" might be either a pre-comparative *tertium* or rather the one main *tertium comparations* in respect of which both *comparanda* are to be compared. Hence, based on the title only, one would perhaps expect that both Aristotle's *Ethics* and the *Zhongyong* deal with a notion of "means", although it would remain unclear whether or not it is the same notion or rather two notions. The main feature that requires extensive analysis is, as will become clear soon, the simple question of what is compared with what in Plaks's "comparative reading".

An analysis makes it clear that the text is indeed mainly comparing Aristotle's *Ethics* and the *Zhongyong* in their contexts, but that the comparative claims that emerge from this comparison are meant to have implications far beyond these "two classical sources" (p. 189), to what Plaks variously refers to as "early Greece and China" (p. 187), "two traditions" (p. 188), "the Greeks... and their Axial Age counterparts in East Asia" (p. 188), "China's intellectual foundations" and "those of the Eastern Mediterranean" (p. 188), "two cultural traditions" (p. 188), "early Chinese and Greek moral philosophy" (p. 188), "different

intellectual traditions" (p. 189), or "two civilizations" (p. 189). In other words, on the basis of what is compared to what, the comparison seems to be about the two texts; on the basis of the results of the comparison, the comparison seems to be about "the two civilizations". The divergence between what is compared and the implications which are attached to the comparison may explain why Plaks chooses to refer to the mean in ancient Greece and in Chinese thought at the level of subtitles. Perhaps the text is best understood as offering a comparison within a comparison; there are certainly multiple levels of *comparanda* involved.

The divergence I have just mentioned certainly does not go unnoticed, as is clear from Plaks's reflections in the "Preliminary Remarks". In these methodological reflections, Plaks highlights "the truism that no general propositions regarding ancient or modern China – or Greece, for that matter – can possibly lay claim to uncontested validity" (p. 188). This allows him to brush aside the problem that most such propositions are quickly challenged by a plethora of counterexamples. Given that no uncontested validity is claimed, we are – Plaks suspects – "free to indulge in the luxury of inconsistency as we tailor our generalizing and essentializing pronouncements about the uniqueness of China to the varying expectations of our listeners" (p. 188). That China is "unique" is of course itself either a truism (e. g. if everything only by virtue of being a distinct thing is considered "unique") or a presupposition that would require substantiation by way of comparing China in all possible regards with all possible *comparanda*. Plaks engages the two texts explicitly "in this spirit" of free indulgence in inconsistencies. Mentioning "the doctrine of the mean" as a "rather marked point of intersection" between the two "cultural traditions" and "the strikingly similar points of departure and the broadly similar formulation of the central issues" in the two texts, Plaks reminds the reader that "this degree of commonality may, however, have less to do with parallel patterns of conception and more to do with basic common sense" (p. 189). That "thinkers from different intellectual traditions" (p. 189) would all be concerned with "the salutary effects of moderation" and would want to "depart from any mechanically defined 'middle way'" (p. 189), in Plaks's view, is to be expected. But Plaks is not so concerned about such commonsensical commonalities, as the statement concluding his "Preliminary Remarks" demonstrates:

> Nevertheless, a more systematic investigation of the precise shape of the argument in these and other relevant classical texts may help to shed light on certain significant divergences in philosophical assumptions and modes of argumentation, and this may perhaps put us on firmer ground for indulging in speculative generalization on the substance of these two civilizations. (p. 189)

This statement is remarkable. Not only does it introduce a remarkable list of pre-comparative *tertia* (the two texts are both considered "classical", both related to "philosophical assumptions" and "modes of argumentation" as well as to "civilizations" that are said to have a "substance"), but it also illustrates how Plaks's comparison of Aristotle's *Ethics* and the *Zhongyong* is based on the presupposition of "significant divergences" (in line with his assertion of the uniqueness of his *comparanda*) and thought to have implications for the much wider context of the mean in ancient Greece and in Chinese thought and even beyond that. Obviously, at this point, it would be equally fair to say that Plaks compares Greek and Chinese civilizations understood as each having a "substance" (!) that is articulated in the two classical texts as it is to say that Plaks compares Aristotle's *Ethics* and the *Zhongyong* understood as classic articulations of the "substance" of the Greek and Chinese civilizations. It basically amounts to saying the same thing, since the texts and the two civilizations are so intimately related in Plaks's presentation.

Given this statement, the gist of Plaks's comparison in the two central parts of the text may come as a surprise to the reader. In the first part, Plaks discusses the notion of the mean in ancient Greece, i.e. in pre-Socratic discourse and in Platonic dialogues, but mainly in Aristotle's ethical writings, for only in Aristotle do we find "a comprehensive argument regarding the application of the principle of the mean in the pursuit of moral excellence" (p. 191); in the second part, in almost parallel fashion, he investigates the notion of the mean in Chinese thought by referring to many earlier sources than the *Zhongyong*, the text which of course he also discusses in some detail, but – in contrast with the first part – he then decides to show that the "central thrust of the *Zhongyong* ... found expression in a number of exegetical and expository writings from Han through Song" (p. 198). Perhaps this might be taken as an indication that Plaks is not so sure as he is in Aristotle's case that we find in the *Zhongyong* the "comprehensive argument" with regard to "the mean in Chinese thought". This is further corroborated by Plaks's use of vocabulary in the second part, in which he speaks of the "'argument' on moral equilibrium in the *Zhongyong*" using quotation marks for "argument" (p. 196), but later comes to deploy the same word without quotation marks ("the integral argument of the *Zhongyong*", p. 198), or speaks of the "message" of the *Zhongyong* first without (p. 195) and then with quotations marks (p. 199). This is of course interesting also for another reason since "modes of argumentation" has above been identified as a pre-comparative *tertium*.

Be that as it may, the reader may be caught unawares by Plaks's comparative reading as he is almost exclusively concerned with pointing out "the common conception and expression in those two unrelated sources" (p. 199). Throughout

the discussion of "the mean in Chinese thought", Plaks over and again emphasizes how "Aristotle's ethical treatises resonate unmistakably" in "several important points" with the *Zhongyong* (p. 194), that both texts "seem very much concerned with steering a correct ethical course determined by markers somewhere along each spectrum of variation, with the aim of arriving at a state of perfection of the individual character and participating in sustaining a broader world order" (p. 195), that "in the *Zhongyong*, several points nearly identical to those made in Aristotle's *Ethics* virtually leap off the page" (p. 196), and that in the "extension of the ideal of equilibrium to the realm of public affairs, we see, once again, an obvious point of convergence with the vision of the mean in Aristotle's *Ethics*" (p. 199). In his "Concluding Remarks" he will add to this that "both Aristotle and the compiler of chapters 2 through 11 of the *Zhongyong* are of common mind" (p. 199) in some "very visible points of similarity" (p. 200). There is in the entire discussion of the mean in Chinese thought only one instance in which Plaks admits a difference between Aristotle's *Ethics* and the *Zhongyong* (which, however, is only a difference in degree in terms of Chinese thought) concerning *zhong* versus *meson* or *mesotês* in respect of being a "borrowed geometrical term" (p. 196).

But Plaks has not forgotten his interest for "significant divergence" (p. 199), and it seems as if he had reserved all discussion of it for his "Concluding Remarks". There, he asks himself how we should "account for the noticeably different directions taken by the respective arguments?" (p. 200). Plaks offers two explanations. The first explanation regards the "markedly more rigorous preoccupation with logical method and in particular mathematical reasoning in classic Greek philosophy" if compared with the few "peripheral" sources "in early Chinese intellectual discourse" (p. 200). Although this point partially refers back to the one difference noted by Plaks in his discussion of the mean in Chinese thought, it deserves emphasis that this divergence in no way results from his comparison of Aristotle's *Ethics* and the *Zhongyong*, but is plainly a new assertion (on the basis of another comparison?). The second explanation draws on the "issue of justice" that "in early Chinese texts" is not developed to the extent it is in "Greek moral philosophy" (p. 200). Plaks mentions the *Zhongyong*, but is quick to add that the situation is no different in other Confucian texts. Again, the divergence is hardly the result of Plaks's comparison. Both these divergences regard the "different directions" that the "respective arguments" have taken, not the "arguments" themselves. It is from this point of view that Plaks even draws out the contrast further and far beyond ancient Greece to "Western conceptions of justice" in general (p. 200). Following this discussion of "different directions" are two differences that directly relate to the two texts and that indeed follow from Plaks's comparison (pp. 200 – 201), but both differ-

ences are immediately smoothed over by pointing towards potential similarities with other texts from each "civilization". In any case, Plaks's text ends with a juxtaposition of *eudaimonia* with "the central Confucian concept of 'cultivation of the self' (修身)", i.e. concepts that are first declared to be "more or less synonymous", but then are found to be different, just to be "ultimately" considered similar again (p. 201). Indeed, Plaks ventures to say that the *Zhongyong*, if available to Plato and Aristotle, would have struck them as "very much the vision of the fulfillment of their much-sought *eudaimonia*" (p. 201).

III From Analysis to Evaluation

The theoretical analysis of comparison and the two exemplary analyses with their emphasis on pre-comparative *tertia* may suggest that the precision in which commonalities are initially stated would provide a most obvious criterion for successful comparison. The more precision, the better, one might think. This is largely correct, but not entirely. Pre-comparative vagueness generally and often is an indication that the comparer might be unaware of or unwilling to admit (for whatever reason) some commonalities (i.e. comparative claims) that are posited by the way the comparison is set up. There is, however, a specific kind of pre-comparative vagueness for which this does certainly not hold. The gap already mentioned, namely the one every comparative inquiry necessarily produces between *comparanda* and *comparata*, builds on this kind of pre-comparative vagueness. Instead of vagueness, one might of course use other terms and speak of shallowness or superficiality, but each of these would then not stand for a deficiency of the comparison, but rather for a necessary condition. Because only if one has a vague or shallow or superficial or presumptive understanding of that which is to be compared, may one find it worthwhile to engage in comparison in the first instance. There are two important conclusions to be drawn from viewing pre-comparative vagueness from this vantage point. One is that the mere fact of there being pre-comparative vagueness as such is not a problem, it is not sufficient for a criticism of a given comparison – indeed someone thinking it sufficient would perhaps only showcase his or her own ignorance of what a comparison is, at least along my analysis – for pre-comparative vagueness is the very condition of comparison. But there must be a threshold regarding such pre-comparative vagueness beyond which we are still right to criticise the comparer for not making it clear enough what it is that he or she by way of comparison seeks to find a deeper or a more detailed understanding of. If too much is left vague, it seems unlikely that any one comparative inquiry would be able to remove that vagueness satisfactorily. Still, how are we to deter-

mine that threshold? The second conclusion regards the locus of vagueness, which I have been careful to qualify as "pre-comparative" vagueness. It seems that if and to the extent that vagueness can be explained by the gap between *comparanda* and *comparata*, that there should be less vagueness in the comparer's claims once the comparison has been conducted, lest it should emerge that the comparison has been entirely unsuccessful, that is, not having brought significant knowledge to what was declared unclear and was therefore left vague at the beginning. In other words, there should be as little post-comparative vagueness as possible.

I am of course aware that vagueness might be valuable in other respects, may serve other purposes and be grounded by different reasons, but at present I am merely trying to tease as much as possible out of my analytic framework of comparison. Only in this way is it perhaps possible to arrive at further potentially useful distinctions. Here is another such (potentially useful) distinction. Above, I have qualified the *comparanda* and the *comparata* as necessarily being "the same but different", which is I think the single most philosophical problem that a dynamically conceived philosophy of comparison must address. But in the light of what I have just said about the pre-comparative vagueness that a successful comparison would remove, it might now appear as if the gap between the *comparanda* and *comparata* were closed simply by a process of getting more precise, more detailed, and less vague about what is still the same. Instead of being "the same, but different", it might now appear that I could have said that the *comparanda* and the *comparata* necessarily must be "the same, but the latter be more precise than the former". The *comparata* would turn out to be simply the more precise version of the *comparanda*. Although that might well be the result in some cases of comparison, I would not want to generalize. On the contrary: it seems to me that in the process of comparison, in the transformation from *comparanda* to *comparata*, the vagueness might even increase, in the extreme case to the point of there being no other *tertia* than the one *tertium* of "being of interest to the comparer" in complete ignorance of what it is that is of interest. The point is that, rather than the same *comparandum* getting more precise, the very act of comparing may change the understanding and presentation of that same *comparandum*, even alter it, or exchange, substitute it with another, an altogether different understanding, perhaps even foregrounding an altogether different *comparandum*. That comparison has the power to force such moves on the comparer might be one of its most intriguing features. Carried to such an extreme, a comparison leading to substitution of this kind probably rightly would be considered unsuccessful in light of the original project, yet it is a natural event in the process leading up to the project. More importantly, in a less

extreme fashion, such alteration is intimately tied to the process of comparison itself.

It is evident that a general answer to the question of successful comparison has to operate at a fairly abstract level in order to be able to accommodate a wide variety of comparisons. A general answer based on my analytic framework can only be formulated at an abstract level also for another reason: criteria for a comparative inquiry may be extracted to the extent that the inquiry is "comparative" – which is what I am concerned about – but many such criteria depend on it being more generally an "inquiry" – which is what I am not concerned about in this chapter. A discussion of criteria for successful or failed inquiry would lead far beyond my analytic framework of comparison to issues such as who determines, how, and on what basis the meaning and end of (academic) inquiry.

Still, at the abstract level, some rough-and-ready criteria for distinguishing a successful comparison may be given:

- A good comparison is as explicit as possible about the main aspects of the comparison, about what is compared with what, what pre-comparative *tertia* are claimed, in what regards the *comparanda* are compared, and about the relations established by the comparison.
- When writing down the presupposed pre-comparative *tertia*, the list should not be confusingly long.
- It should be reasoned how the pre-comparative *tertia* relate to the *comparanda*.
- If there is vagueness, it should relate to the purpose of the inquiry, and that vagueness should have been removed at the end of the comparison.
- If two *comparanda* are compared in a certain respect and that respect is qualified as being "similar", then it should be made clear in what respect they are considered "similar" until one arrives at a respect that is claimed to be the "same".
- The *comparata* should neither be the same nor completely different from the *comparanda*. If it is, then we are facing a failed comparison, one that has either under- or over-performed.

These are merely examples of criteria that might be derived from the analytic framework that I have presented. But all of that requires much further elaboration. My experience in analysing comparisons hitherto suggests that the analysis of pre- and post-comparative *tertia*, of which often the comparer is entirely unaware, might offer the greatest potential in terms of evaluation. To keep one's pre-and post-comparative *tertia* fully in view, few in number and well-reasoned is a very difficult business.

Evaluation of "Greek and Chinese Categories"

There is much that recommends Reding's text on "Greek and Chinese categories" (2004) as a candidate for a successful comparison, including its high degree of sensitivity towards methodological problems. This is, for instance, impressively demonstrated when, after his comparative comments, Reding is quick to concede that he had been "looking at the Later Mohists' achievements from a rather Aristotelian perspective" and therefore should conclude his study "with a few considerations on how the Later Mohists have understood themselves, and on what they think they were doing when we say that they have been distinguishing between Aristotelian categories" (p. 91). Yet, this very statement also raises doubts about the comparison that he had just presented. The declared aim was to see whether "any of the ancient Chinese philosophers did ask the same questions as Aristotle" (p. 68). For Reding's argumentation, it seemed crucial that this quest for Chinese philosophers asking the same questions as Aristotle would not amount to "one of the fatal dangers threatening any comparative analysis, namely, that of mistaking a superficial resemblance for a deep structural affinity" (pp. 83 – 84) as when one were simply to "start off from the bare list of Aristotle's categories" (p. 83). So, when the Chinese philosophers asked these questions, it seems crucial that they really asked these questions and not others. Declaring his analysis as having been done under a "rather Aristotelian perspective" casts doubt on whether Reding has succeeded in offering a better basis for comparison than the straightforward comparison on the basis of the bare list. The considerations that he offers about what the Later Mohists thought they were doing still draw on comparison and appeal to a distinction in "the background" and "cultural attitude" that makes the Aristotelian categories "ontological" and the "Later Mohists' categories … criteria for naming correctly" (p. 91). So it is still "categories", "definitions" and "philosophy" on both sides. Upon closer examination, Reding leaves the reader slightly baffled as to what exactly the difference is between his considerations from a rather Aristotelian perspective and his considerations from the Later Mohists' perspective. Despite "apparently fundamental differences" in the respective contexts "of definition", which is the result of reconsidering the matter decidedly from the Later Mohists' perspective, Reding concludes that "both approaches start from a common point, namely, from the experience of category confusions, provoked by misleading semantic and syntactical structures" (p. 92). But even when operating under a "rather Aristotelian perspective" and discussing a set of Later Mohists' definitions, Reding had already noted that "these definitions do not obey the strict Aristotelian pattern of a *genus* followed by a *differentia*", thus emphasizing difference, only to highlight commonality in the next sentence, writing: "Nevertheless,

they are true definitions in the sense, namely, that the *definiens* states what the *definiendum* essentially is" (p. 88).

Throughout the text, this ambivalence shows as Reding seems to dither between assertions of commonality and assertions of similarity. Regarding the questions that both Aristotle and his Chinese counterpart are supposed to have asked, Reding in one instance describes his task as discovering "if somebody among the ancient pre-Han philosophers did ask questions similar to the ones raised by Aristotle" (p. 82) and in another instance as finding "somebody who has asked the same questions as Aristotle" (p. 82). Later, Reding asks the reader to "note, incidentally, that Aristotle's investigations in the *Topics* closely resemble the Later Mohists' project" (p. 88) and remarks that "the Later Mohists experienced, though in a different linguistic setting, a situation similar to Aristotle's" (p. 89). For all that similarity (the respect in which such similarity is claimed is not always made clear), it is astonishing that when registering the "most important result for our inquiry", Reding chooses to speak of the Later Mohists' distinctions as "coincid[ing] exactly" with some of Aristotle's categorical distinctions; and writes that "the tie that holds together the four senses of *gui* ... can be equated with the Aristotelian 'focal meaning'" (p. 89). This last statement is also astonishing, since nowhere in the text is any reason given why they "can be equated". It is therefore not a "result" of the comparative inquiry, but rather a new comparative claim to be tested by an inquiry, a claim that is being smuggled into the statement of results of another comparative inquiry.

Reding's essay brings to light a fundamental difficulty of any comparison. The methodologically sensitive comparer might be hesitant in claiming a commonality between two *comparanda*. This is evident in Reding's rejection of a comparison based on the bare list of Aristotle's categories and also in his ambiguous statements with regard to the status and nature of definition on both sides. Yet a comparison must be based on one or several asserted commonalities. Any such assertion is open for challenge on grounds of it not really denoting a commonality. When Reding declares Aristotle's and the Later Mohists' definitions both to be "true definitions", then that might be challenged by pointing out the inadequateness of the definition of what makes a true definition, i.e. "the *definiens* states what the *definiendum* essentially is", on the very grounds that Reding himself later invokes when distinguishing between an ontological endeavour on Aristotle's side and a concern for different kinds of naming on the side of the Later Mohists. But it might also be challenged on Reding's own admonition that it is important to ask what problems such attempts at definition were trying to answer, which – to be fair – is exactly what he does, thus arriving at the common problem of fighting against languages whose structures are more or less hostile to categorical distinctions. Yet, this answer is predicated on the

pre-comparative *tertia* of logical and linguistic structures working in the same manner in both *comparanda*. That this is a useful distinction (logical vs. linguistic structures) is not explicitly argued in Reding's text, but it is the fundament on which the entire comparison rests – as is the pre-comparative *tertium* of philosophy, which is not substantiated or explicated in the text.

Evaluation of "Means and Means: A Comparative Reading of Aristotle's Ethics and the Zhongyong"

My analysis of Plaks (2002) and his "comparative reading" has mainly emphasized and sought to disentangle various levels of *comparanda*, and it is from there that my evaluation takes its starting-point. The first part of the title is a wonderful way of articulating the pre-comparative vagueness that the successful comparative inquiry would be expected to have removed at the end of the comparison: "means and means". Although Plaks in the two central parts of his text deals with that vagueness and succeeds in removing some of it (mainly by pointing out commonalities), the differences between the "two classical texts" mentioned rather briefly in his "Concluding Remarks" eventually leave the reader without a clear result from the comparison. Granted that any comparison will always yield commonalities as well as differences in one or the other respect, would a successful comparison not be expected to give an overall assessment, in Plaks's case, answering the question of how the briefly mentioned differences weigh against the many commonalities emphasized in the central parts of the text? Or more precisely: how, in the comparer's assessment, do the respects in which the two *comparata* are found to be different weigh against the respects in which they are found to be similar? Do many respects of similarity outweigh a few respects of difference? Or may one respect of difference be of such importance as to outweigh many respects of similarity? Can these questions be answered on the basis of two *comparata* only, or would the answer depend on the inclusion of further *comparanda?* These are tricky questions, but it seems to me that some answer should be offered lest comparisons turn out simply to reproduce in their results the truism that there are differences and commonalities; that much, to be sure, was known from the outset.

Above I have emphasized that the necessary pre-comparative vagueness that the inquiry seeks to address is to be distinguished from a pre-comparative vagueness that might inform the *comparanda* but is not part of that which is to be inquired. The many different descriptions at the level of the two *comparanda* as "two civilizations" in Plaks's text, in my view, introduce a vagueness that is precisely of the latter kind. It is not clear how each description is thought to relate to

the others, and the question is never addressed in the comparison itself. These *comparanda* remain vague from beginning to end. This is all the more disconcerting since the comparison of Aristotle's *Ethics* and the *Zhongyong* is meant to reveal something about these *comparanda*, for the comparison should "put us on firmer ground for indulging in speculative generalization on the substance of these two civilizations" (p. 189). Remember that the pre-comparative vagueness that motivates the inquiry at the level of the "two civilizations" concerns the question of their "substance" and is different from the pre-comparative vagueness introduced by the many different descriptions of the "two civilizations". There is a related problem. Given that Plaks emphasizes commonalities to an extent that would perhaps warrant our suspicion that his overall assessment of differences and commonalities would lean towards the latter, it is entirely unclear how that finding, i.e. the finding of a high degree of commonality, would possibly come to support his presuppositions about "certain significant divergences in philosophical assumptions and modes of argumentation" in ancient Greece and Chinese thought, which is the explicitly stated aim at the beginning of the comparison. Or, are we here facing an instance of a comparison in which the comparer simply by virtue of comparing has ended up with a set of *comparata* significantly different from the *comparanda*, perhaps to his own surprise?

Finally, there is a certain imbalance in Plaks's treatment of the two *comparanda* that requires further attention. When he discusses the mean in ancient Greece, Plaks does not once refer to Chinese thought. His discussion of the mean in Chinese thought, however, begins straight away with a comparative claim, and throughout that part such cross-references frequently occur. One possible explanation for this would be to say that Plaks has a firmer grasp on the *comparandum* that is ancient Greece and cannot but portray the mean in Chinese thought comparatively, i.e. cannot but establish the second *comparandum* in view of the first *comparandum*. But this is not the case. Plaks uses virtually no Aristotelian language to describe what the *Zhongyong* and other Chinese texts are about. Another explanation is more straightforward. The cross-referencing in terms of commonalities in the second part might simply be what Plaks understands by a "comparative reading" (perhaps drawing more on the meaning of "comparable" as "substitutable"), but it would not make much sense to include in the first part similar cross-references to a *comparandum* that is not yet discussed. Be that as it may, the structure of Plaks's text – discussion of the first *comparandum*, comparative reading of the second *comparandum* in terms of commonalities only, and concluding remarks including a comparative reading in terms of differences and some further commonalities at the other level of *comparanda*, is certainly remarkable.

IV Conclusions

Before concluding with my main findings, I should like to note some limitations of my analytic approach to comparison. A general limitation is perhaps captured by asking (drawing on Stanley Fish's question about poems), "how do you recognize a comparison if you see one?" – meaning that my framework presupposes a concept of comparison to which one might want to object, e.g. on the grounds of conceptual narrowness or overstretch. For example, one sort of comparison which my framework seems perhaps ill-suited to handle is less about inquiry, but more playful, more artful. For comparison can be viewed like an associative mechanism, where the throwing of something unexpected next to the all too familiar might be used to break conventional chains of associations. In this sense, vague or what others have called illegitimate comparisons might be programmatically pursued and turn out to be highly productive. This would approximate to a sort of random selection of *comparanda*, although I would hasten to add that there would still be relevant pre-comparative *tertia* that an analysis could make explicit (the presupposition of the two *comparanda* not usually being put one next to the other would probably be based on a set of differences that would be different in some regard and thus would be based on a specific common grid of criteria rather than on another). But if comparison is understood as an associative machine, then the whole point is to abstain from any reflection about the pre-comparative *tertia*.

The second limitation that I want to mention is more challenging. It concerns the application of my analytic framework itself, which is modelled on the actual practice and specific temporality of a comparer engaging in a comparison, whereas the resulting text describing the comparison often does not mirror that process but is carefully constructed and revised, artificially and artfully narrated, and so on and so forth. The less the actual text mirrors the process of comparison, the more the power of my analytical framework might be limited, or, on a less pessimistic note, the more work the analyst of comparison has to invest in a reconstruction of that process. Reding's text may be a case in point. Whereas he begins with thinking about "Chinese categories" and more than once initially states that the task ahead is to find out "if any of the ancient Chinese philosophers did ask the same questions as Aristotle" (p. 68), it is rather obvious that from the outset he has already decided on the Later Mohists as the best candidates, although he only mentions them about two thirds into the text (and thereafter consistently speaks of "Chinese philosophers"). Throughout the text, no other candidates are ever considered. At the face of it, the analysis of the text would probably recommend "Chinese philosophers" as part of a pre-compara-

tive *tertium* and the "Later Mohists" as the result of a decision taken in the transformation of *comparanda* into *comparata*, perhaps taken once the *tertium comparationis* of Aristotle's questions has been more firmly established and is about to be applied to ancient China. The circumstantial evidence (such as the salience of the Later Mohists in the chapter preceding the one on "Greek and Chinese Categories") would not support this analysis. The way a comparison is presented is hardly ever the way it is conducted in the first instance (and there are certainly good reasons for this state of affairs).

Whereas the *tertium comparationis* and the introduced related set of distinctions have in my view great value as a tool of analysis and thereby provide some firmer ground on which to evaluate comparisons, the latter task remains a much more complicated affair. This is so not only due to the importance of evaluative criteria beyond 'comparative' inquiry (the ones of inquiry more generally), but also due to the importance of taking into account the specific purposes that the comparer might pursue with the comparison. These purposes may vary greatly. In some comparisons, the comparer might be interested in establishing the equivalence of two *comparanda*; in others the purpose might be to demonstrate the 'uniqueness' of one or both *comparanda*. Some comparisons are more interested in one of the *comparanda* than the other. A comparison might be conducted with the aim of "doing justice" to each or all of the *comparanda*, or it might not be that much about the *comparanda* at all, but aim at drawing merely inspiration from them or to make instrumental use of them. For some comparisons, it might be a reason for negative evaluation if it can be shown that the one *comparandum* substantially coincides with the *tertia comparationis* (e.g. if the *Zhongyong* is read in Aristotelian terms); in other cases that might be the very condition to ensure a successful comparison. The point is that each of these purposes may be backed by good reasons.

Of course, the analyst of comparison may disagree with the purposes attached to a comparison, but it would seem important to distinguish between negative evaluations based on a criticism of the aims pursued and negative evaluations relating to a failure to achieve the declared purpose and the concomitant claims of the comparison itself. Conversely, positive evaluations based on pursuing the same purpose should be distinguished from internally derived positive evaluations. Such evaluation, in any case, would require that the comparer and the analyst of comparison are clear about the pursued purposes and make them clear. Often it seems that comparers (and probably also analysts of comparison) are committed to several purposes at once. Plaks's text perhaps is an example of this tendency with its operating at several levels simultaneously. In Reding's terms, one should make it clear what question one seeks to answer. Collingwood (1998: p. 38) makes the point nicely:

> When a question first comes into one's mind it is generally (I speak for myself, and perhaps I am not here very different from other people) a confused mass of different questions, all of which, because all must be answered before I can catch my dinner, and because I am hungry, I ask at once. But they cannot all be answered at once. Before they can be answered they must be distinguished, and the nest of questions resolved into a list of questions where each item is one question and only one.

If comparison often start out with a "confused mass of different questions", then certainly also the analyst of comparison does. The main questions that my chapter has sought to set out for discussion concern how to conceive an analytic framework of comparison that captures the dynamic aspects of the process of comparison as well as whether and if, how, that framework may be used as a tool for analysis and also for evaluation. The distinctions drawn between the *tertium comparationis* and the pre-comparative *tertium*, between the *comparanda* and the *comparata*, between the pre-comparative vagueness that the comparative inquiry seeks to remove and the one of which the comparer is unaware, and perhaps the problem of how to weigh the respects of difference and the respects of commonality so as to arrive at an overall assessment are amongst my main findings. Many of these aspects have so far received scant attention in comparative studies and all of them require much more thought, not least because comparison is fundamental to academic and non-academic inquiry.

References

Collingwood, R. G. (1944) *An Autobiography*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Collingwood, R. G. (1998) *An Essay on Metaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Plaks, A. (2002) Means and Means: A Comparative Reading of Aristotle's *Ethics* and the *Zhongyong*. In Shankman S. & Durrant S.W. (eds.). *Early China/Ancient Greece: Thinking through Comparison*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Reding, J.-P. (2004) *Comparative Essays in Early Greek and Chinese Rational Thinking*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Shankman, S. & Durrant S.W. (2002) Introduction. In Shankman, S. & Durrant S.W. (eds.). *Early China/Ancient Greece: Thinking through Comparison*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Tanner, J. (2009) Ancient Greece, Early China: Sino-Hellenic Studies and Comparative Approaches to the Classical World: A Review Article. *Journal of Hellenic Studies*. 129. p. 89–109.

Thiel, C. (2004) tertium comparationis. In Mittelstrass, J. (ed.). *Enzyklopädie Philosophie und Wissenschaftstheorie*. Vol. 4. Stuttgart: Metzler.

Weber, R. (2013a) A Stick which May Be Grabbed by either End: Sino-Hellenic Studies in the Mirror of Comparative Philosophy. *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*. 20 (1/2). p. 1–14.

Weber, R. (2013b) How to Compare? On the Methodological State of Comparative Philosophy. *Philosophy Compass*. 8 (7). p. 593 – 603.
Weber, R. (2013c) Making the Implicit Explicit – An Analysis of Some Comparative Claims in Guo Yi's Discussion of Chinese and European Philosophy. In Guo Y., Josofovic, S. and Lätzer-Lasar, A. (eds.). *Metaphysical Foundations of Knowledge and Ethics in Chinese and European Philosophy.* Morphomata Reihe. Munich: Wilhelm Fink.
Weber, R. (2014a) Comparative Philosophy and the Tertium: Comparing What with What, and in What Respect? *Dao: Journal of Comparative Philosophy*. 13 (2). p. 151 – 171.
Weber, R. (2014b) On Comparative Approaches to Rhetoric in Ancient China. *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques*. 68 (4). p. 925 – 935.